

“The Peace of Christ”

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Acts 16:25-34

John 20:19-31

<sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted loudly, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!”

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

<sup>30</sup> He led them outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?”

Let us pray... O God,

Grant us peace for the living of each day

May we find reasons to be grateful for the grace you send.

May we remain hopeful for the glory yet to be.

May we grow in awareness of your presence through Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen

In 2014, Brian McLaren was the guest speaker

at our UCC Florida Conference Spring Meeting

and he preached on this text from Acts 16.

He said that the jailer wanted what Paul and Silas had –

he wanted to be saved.

McLaren then went on to say that being “saved” back in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE

did not mean ‘going to Heaven’. It meant being saved *now*.

This is consistent with the Common English Version of this text,

with the jailer asking ‘... what must I do to be *rescued*?’

The jailer wanted what Paul and Silas had – he wanted peace and joy *now*.

But let me come back to that; First, let’s consider the backstory...

Acts 16 began with the Apostle Paul being told by the Holy Spirit

not to go east into Asia – though ‘Asia’ at that time,

referred to a region in what is now Turkey –

still, he was not to go east.

Then, he receives a vision of a person from Macedonia inviting him to come help,

and so Paul and his fellow missionaries venture west

until they come to a Roman community called Thyatira.

So, this was a turning point to focus the early Church’s evangelical efforts

on Europe – the western part of the Roman Empire.

While in Thyatira, they go to an outdoor place of worship by a riverside,

where they speak with a group of women there.

A woman named Lydia was very moved by what they said.

She already believed in God and agreed to be baptized by them

and subsequently her family was as well.

She was a merchant who sold purple goods – which implied wealth;

She also owned her own house

where she invited the apostles to stay.

Willard, p.2

On their way to Lydia's home, they were approached by a clairvoyant woman whom kept calling out to them, saying,

*"These men are servants of the Most High God!*

*They are telling you how to be saved."* [Acts 16:16]

For the next couple days, she would yell the same thing, until finally, Paul had had enough and said,

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you to leave this girl alone!"

and at once the soothsaying spirit was exorcised.

But this angered those who were making money off her talent.

and they lied to the local authorities saying,

*"These Jews are upsetting our city!*

*They are telling us to do things we Romans are not allowed to do."*

[Acts 16:20-21]

A crowd formed and they became possessed by a spirit of mob mentality,

and they caught Paul and Silas to beat them brutally and have them arrested.

It was at this point they were in jail...

In Acts 16:25 it says,

*Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*

They were fellowshiping. They were doing a singalong and telling stories.

They were entertaining everyone there, prisoner and guard alike –

as they kept their own spirits up despite their outward circumstances.

All of a sudden, there was an earthquake – which would not be unheard of in that part of the Mediterranean.

The doors were unhinged and the chains were loosened,

so that they all could escape...

The repercussions for prison escapes must've been pretty tough on jailers back then, but there seems to have been some benefits, too –

enough for this jailer to have a house and a family.

Yet he was prepared to commit suicide on the assumption that

the prisoners had all escaped

He feared being held responsible for something he had no control over –

what insurance companies these days would call 'an act of God'.

Whatever the punishment would have been,

this man considered taking his own life as a better option.

Now the contract conditions for this First Century prison workplace

were hardly favorable to employees and this brings to mind

an anecdote about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when

he was imprisoned in a Birmingham jail for his Civil Rights activities.

Willard, p.3

Having a conversation with his guard, Dr. King pointed out  
to this fellow that he was as much a prisoner as King was,  
economically as well as the nature of life there in the jail.

Whether that led to an attitude change on the part of King's guard is unknown,  
but the point is made about how oppression works against the oppressor, too.

In the aftermath of the earthquake in the city of Thyratira,  
the jailer found the doors were unhinged and the chains were loosened,  
so that all the prisoners could escape... but they didn't!  
The prisoners didn't want to leave. They didn't want to leave Paul and Silas  
who prayed and sang together late into the night  
and who calmed them through the catastrophe.

It was after seeing all this that the jailer asks this question,  
'... *what must I do to be rescued?*' [Acts 16:30]

Paul and Silas tell him,

*"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—  
you and your entire household."* [Acts 16:31]

The apostles continued to speak to him and to his family as well;  
The jailer welcomed them and dressed their wounds from injuries  
received during the earthquake as well as  
the beating they took when they were arrested.

Then, the jailer and his family were baptized  
and – though it is not clear about the other prisoners,  
Paul and Silas were invited into the family's home for a meal.

This passage closes with the jailer being joyful that his family  
'had come to believe in God'.

After the miraculous events of the earthquake and the jailer's conversion,  
the local administrators resolved to just let Paul and Silas go.

But not so fast, Paul lets them know, because he and Silas were Roman citizens  
which proves to be very embarrassing for the local authorities.

These magistrates themselves come to the jail to apologize to Paul and Silas –  
while at the same time ask them to leave their city.

Instead, Paul and Silas go back to Lydia's home to encourage the community of faith  
there, before they continue on...

Brian McLaren's observation that salvation in the First Century CE  
was about being rescued now from this world;

This interpretation has helped me to see how consistently  
modern scholarship has been about how the early Church spread  
from the Middle East throughout Europe –  
by sharing their beliefs through conversation and basic hospitality.

Willard, p.4

These days, we are seeing how ideology can take hold of people and spread with such determination that goes way beyond stubborn. We are seeing how people are willing to die for what they believe – and far too often they are willing to kill others to make their point. But what was it about the early Christian church movement that had its followers so determined to make it work nonviolently?

Our Gospel lesson gives us a hint by giving us a glimpse of that event when something happened to change the world – and that can still change the world...

*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the [Judeans], Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." [John 20:19]*

The first disciples' encounter with the Risen Christ transformed them from despairing followers to mission-oriented apostles.

They took things as far as they could, but they received help from someone who did not experience Jesus in the same way they did, yet who had skills and resources they did not. Though Jesus did not literally breathe the Holy Spirit upon the Apostle Paul – or the Apostle Thomas or any of us for that matter, yet both of them and all of us have access to that same Spirit in ways that God tailors for us as individuals.

Paul who was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, started out as an enemy who would become Christianity's greatest interpreter.

1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians is believed to be the first book of our Christian scriptures, that was actually written by Paul.

In its concluding chapter, there are a remarkable set of challenges which serve to outline what God expects us to do to be open to God's presence.

They are brief and to the point...

*Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. [1<sup>st</sup> Thess. 5:16-18]*

Friends, let us seek joy in the midst of any and all circumstances;

Let's seek God's help through prayer in the midst of any and all circumstances;

Let's give thanks to God for the grace we receive in the midst of any and all circumstances...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Acts 16:25-34 describes what happened to the Apostles Paul and Silas while in jail for disturbing the peace. Paul had exorcised a clairvoyant spirit from a woman and her handlers were furious at this loss of their income...*

<sup>25</sup> Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

<sup>26</sup> All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison's foundations.

The doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose.

<sup>27</sup> When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

<sup>28</sup> But Paul shouted loudly,

"Don't harm yourself! We're all here!"

<sup>29</sup> The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

<sup>30</sup> He led them outside and asked,

"Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?"

<sup>31</sup> They replied,

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your entire household."

<sup>32</sup> They spoke the Lord's word to him and everyone else in his house.

<sup>33</sup> Right then, in the middle of the night,

the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds.

He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

<sup>34</sup> He brought them into his home and gave them a meal.

He was overjoyed because he and everyone in his household had come to believe in God.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

John 20:19-31

- <sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,  
the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the [Judeans],  
Jesus came and stood among them and said to them,  
“Peace be with you.”
- <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.  
Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.
- <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again,  
“Peace be with you. As [my Abba] the Father has sent me, even so I send you.”
- <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them,  
“Receive the Holy Spirit.  
<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;  
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”
- <sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them  
when Jesus came.
- <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him,  
“We have seen the Lord.”  
But he said to them,  
“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails,  
and place my finger in the mark of the nails,  
and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”
- <sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house,  
and Thomas was with them.  
The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said,  
“Peace be with you.”
- <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas,  
“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,  
and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.”
- <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him,  
“My Lord and my God!”
- <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him,  
“Have you believed because you have seen me?  
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”
- <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,  
which are not written in this book;
- <sup>31</sup> but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,  
and that believing you may have life in his name.